AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS OF B. M. CROKER

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Croker's portrayal of women in her selected works, highlighting the nuances and evolving perspectives she brought to her female characters. There are over two scores of novels and more than half a dozen short stories in her name; her writing witnessed, contributed, and evolved according to the significant transformations in societal norms and expectations for women. In her novels, she often examined the roles, challenges, and aspirations of women in a complex tapestry of British colonial life, particularly in India and Ireland. The depth with which she depicts her female characters proves that she has a nuanced and diverse understanding of the constraints and opportunities faced by women in a rapidly changing world. Through her works, Croker explores the themes of love, marriage, social status, isolation, loneliness, superstitious beliefs, mental breakdowns, and personal ambitions as they relate to her female characters. In works like ***Given in Marriage****, she shows the limitations posed on women when it came to life-altering decisions like marrying a stranger.* ***A Bird of Passage*** *and* ***The Real Lady Hilda*** *are two of the numerous of her works that showcased her ability to craft female protagonists who were not only strong and independent but defied traditional gender roles. These women grappled with issues such as forced marriage, class divisions, and the struggle for autonomy, embodying the spirit of resilience and adaptability****.*** *On the other hand, in works like* ***The Company's Servant*** *and* ***Her Own People,*** *Croker had also delved into the traditional and domestic roles of women portraying a dutiful wife and a gentle young lady, respectively. She showed these women with a balanced view of the expectations they were facing, and at the same time revealed the complexity that lurked within their seemingly ordinary lives. Croker's tales didn't just limit themselves to the experiences of the English women. She has also explored the lives of Indian women in her novels such as* ***In Old Madras,*** *exploring the intersection of culture, tradition, and modernity in the narratives. Themes like superstitions, psychological tensions, and mental and emotional breakdowns are explored in* ***The Cat's Paw.*** *The themes of her novels are rather serious, as seen in her first novel,* ***Proper Pride****, wherein she delves into the topic of gender isolation, loneliness, and stormy marital relationships. Her female characters had become multifaceted people with their own aspirations, desires, complexities, and personalities whether they were dealing with turbulent marital or romantic relationships or were facing the turmoil of a life in colonial India. In particular, this work deals with a rich and diversified tapestry of women's*

lives and experiences from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. She has challenged conventional gender norms with her progressive and sympathetic depiction of women, thereby contributing to literature by increasing the voices and stories of female characters. Her writings continue to be read by today's readers and provide invaluable perspectives into the evolution of women's roles and aspirations in history. In this work, I'd like to present Croker's depiction of women and her feminist stance in her seven works (Given in Marriage, A Bird of Passage, The Real Lady Hilda, The Company's Servant, Her Own People, In Old Madras, The Cat's Paw, and her debut novel, Proper Pride).

Keywords: *Gender, feminism, women, novel, depiction*

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INTRODUCTION

In this synopsis, Croker's depiction of women with regards to their status, role in society, authority in household, romantic relationships, role and position as a woman in colonial India is explored. Her portrayals of female hysteria, isolation due to loneliness in a foreign land, emotional and psychological distress, and supernatural beliefs are some of the underlying subthemes, that are also looked into. Croker's work has been praised in general for having a sensitive ear for speech, idiom, and the diction of different classes. She reproduces this in an amusing manner which entertains all. The late 19th century was also a time when the Empire faced an uprising from the Indian army. As such, even though there was sympathy on Croker's part for the women, children, and colonised Indians, being the wife of a British officer, she couldn't help the plight in a direct way. In order to make her works appealing to the readers, mainly to the women, her heroines are either motherless or childless. With romantic themes taking a spotlight in her novels and colonial settings in the background, depictions of women and their roles and positions in society carefully get concealed between the two themes. The situations portrayed in her books and in real life were quite similar, in the sense that females had no authority over choices. Croker's heroines are mostly either from Britain or Ireland. The husbands were often deployed in the service to the crown in one way or another. The two situations are quite like her own and thus were quite relatable to both sets of readers, male or female.

Many of her women characters are dutiful, obedient, and sometimes, even repressed. Such women were termed as "Angels" of the Anglo-Indian society. They remained in the private sphere of their homes, managing the domestic life. They looked over the day-to-day activities of the household, the kids, the husband, and such. It made her feel in power of the house while the reality was the opposite. The woman of the house, her ideas, and opinions were more often than not, ignored. There were several guides and handbooks for the Anglo-Indian women who were to rule over their mini-Indian empire just as their husbands were to do at a larger stage. Not retaliating against the decisions made by the men of the household was one of the primary instructions. One of the attempts by these women was to recreate England in their houses as well as in the clubs. She is advised to overlook their mistakes and such instances would only increase if there is punishment or scolding. The angel of the house, as mentioned earlier, was expected to keep both the husband and kids happy. However, when the children reached a certain age after which they had to be sent to England for their education, or if their health demanded that they be sent to their homeland, the woman was torn between the two, and

whatever she chose resulted in her being a failure at the other. She was either a bad, uncaring mother or an unfeeling wife.

Many believed, and still believe, that the women of Empire were snobbish, uptight and held themselves far above from the colonised society. This is disproved in several of Croker's novels as well as in various papers, reviews, and articles about the *"Memsahibs"* and the *"Miss-sahibs"*. The word "*memsahib"* was first used in 1857. According to Merriam-Webster, it means "a white foreign woman of high social status living in India, especially: the wife of a British official," while a "*miss-sahib*" is similar to "*memsahib"* but is unmarried, young, and socially outranks the servants hired for her in India. Both were cast as snobbish and uptight. There are theories alluding to the ruin of the Empire because of the role of females in it. Patrick Branlinger notes, "before British women or "memsahibs" came in numbers, the male imperialist freely intermingled with the Indians, often acquiring Indian mistresses, and wives and creating a sizeable 'Eurasian' population. According to the "ruin of the empire narrative", the memsahibs broke up the party…". This created an image of a woman who was shallow, isolated, and interested only in her household. Several depictions of anti-heroines by Croker affirm to this image of the colonial woman in India. However, her heroines were shown not only as dutiful wives, caring mothers, loving daughters, and so on but also as kind mistresses and generous *firangis.* Pat Barr, in her book "The Memsahibs", published in 1976, notes that "It is unfortunate that Kipling did not broaden his canvas to include as much diversity of character among them (the Memsahibs) as he developed for his male characters." It can allude to the alien environment, unfamiliar people and country, and the fact that even though the British were the rulers, the females of the Empire never quite fit in or found themselves comfortable enough to consider India as their home. What Barr had successfully achieved near the end of the 20th century; Croker had begun during the turbulent decade of the 1880s. With a heroine whose pride was more important to her than her husband's claim that he had not been married before, she started off her writing career portraying women as unbending to society's rules and expectations and as somebody who had minds and wills of their own; these women were said to be hysteric and were isolated, punished, outcasted and even disowned because of their non-conformity to the gender binary.

There is an overlap in the introduction of the Anglo-Indian women's fiction and the shaping up of the New Woman Writings. She wrote her debut novel, Proper Pride toward the end of the nineteenth century is said to have shown bias towards the male viewpoint and punishes its strong, spirited heroine for her pride, leading to a rift between her and her loving husband. This

remark does not conform to the idea of Croker being a feminist writer, however, the free-spirited heroine who separates from her husband on the account of her pride is an indication of the beginning of the New Woman in literature. Written in 1882, the novel pre-dates this concept by more than a decade and that can be considered to be the reason for the non-acceptance of such a heroine at that time. The word "New Woman" was coined by British feminist writer Sarah Grand in 1894. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" first witnessed the use of this term. It was used to describe independent women who sought achievement and self-fulfilment beyond marriage and family. As women became more active members of the workforce, the concept of New Woman emerged, Croker, however, started depicting them as having independence in the private matters of life later on moving to the public areas. McKenna Coon in her thesis, "New Women in the Anglo-Indian Novel, 1878-1901", states that "…Anglo-Indian novels often took the form of the Station Romance. This subgenre frequently focused on a young girl coming to India, meeting her romantic interest in the English exclusive settlements called stations and, after a brief misadventure, eventually marrying him and becoming a proper Englishwoman." This statement is the entire plot of the novels written by Croker, however, the depictions of women in these Station Romances by Croker in the novels written in the 1900s can be said to depict something of the New Woman. "Given In Marriage (1916)", shows the heroine fleeing away from her husband and not caring about him or giving a thought to her marital life points to her being a woman conscious of her own mind and acting according to her will. She is not coerced into any romantic relationship and even rejects a few. This is one of the many examples that Croker subtly puts to paper in her novels. Similar portrayals of women speaking their mind, acting according to their own will, rejecting proposals of wealthy families, and/or marrying below their stations was seen as a sign of a woman who was "hysteric", or a "mad-woman".

Emotionally charged behaviour that seems excessive and out of control is termed hysteria. It's commonly considered hysterical when someone responds in a manner that appears to be overly or disproportionately emotional according to the situation. While Croker's works often reflect the societal norms and attitudes of the periods she lived in, they also depict women not always following the norms and expectations. She often showed her women breaking down under the pressure of living in a foreign land with unfamiliar faces around her. The psychological burden of living in an alien land (whether colonial India, Britain, or Ireland), not living up to expectations, or not being able to live with freedom led to scenes of hysterical behaviour by Croker's women. Belief in superstitions, ghosts, dreams, and apparitions is another subtheme explored by Croker which was often passed off as comical or hysterical on women's part only

because of their sex. According to Rosemary Cargill Raza, Croker's stories often create dramatic tension by depicting 'threats to the established order in societies bound by convention' regarding both class and gender. The theme of superstitions is apparent in certain stories due to their placement in colonial India where folklore, cultural myths symbolism, and omens were commonly believed in and were even trusted to be the correct explanation. In such an environment and society, Anglo-Indian women often found themselves at a loss of not only possible explanations but were also unable to make allies, thus widening an already deep gap between the colonised and coloniser.

As stated in one of the previous paragraphs, women, or "memsahibs" in particular were considered to be the reason of the "breaking up of the party" between the British men and the Indian women. There are several instances in the eight books I've referred to in the abstract that serve as examples for the depiction of the psychological war between women of both races. Besides their exoticness, the social class and the fact that they were the colonised ones dipped the scales against them. The depiction of Anglo-Indian women as snobbish and arrogant put a mark against them. However, Croker often sympathised with both races and exceptionally related to each.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Croker wrote only fictional works, unlike many of her feminist contemporaries who also wrote non-fiction to accelerate the feminist movement. Much of her works are not reviewed or talked about in today's times. Even during the time she wrote, she did not receive much visibility or appreciation for her works. In 1919 she wrote to the publisher Edmund Downey: "It is strange to me that I never receive any acknowledgment from my native land as an Irish novelist ... Irish papers rarely notice me, save *The Freeman's Journal*, whose abuse is most amusing".'

John Wilson Foster, in his, *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (Oxford: OUP 2008), criticises several Irish novelists in the first chapter, titled *'A Deplorable Facility': Popular Fiction,* he writes, "Black had it from Croker that the latter secretly drew out her pen 'to beguile the long weary days' and that, having done so, 'as in a dream, everything passed swiftly before her: fleeting visions of places, people past and present, conversations, ideas, &c. The moment of inspiration had come and was seized. . . day after was spent in transmitting her thoughts to paper.' She wrote ten to twelve hours a day." Harshly criticising reviews of Croker's works have prevented them from entering into the mainstream genre of books today and have made the research of her work all the more difficult. Nevertheless, upon reading her works in the light of when they were published and the historical background of that time, it is not hard to discern the hidden themes in her works.

Sarah Bilston in her book *The Awkward Age in Women's Popular Fiction, 1850-1900: Girls and the Transition to Womanhood (OUP, 2004),* remarks that authors like Isabella Neil Harwood, Bertha Buxton, and Bithia Mary Croker are rarely read today, but they were the popular fiction of the Victorian times and were widely reviewed. Bilston also acknowledges Croker to be one of the forerunners of the New Woman movement by pointing out the fact that the latter's debut novel came out around the same time as the shaping up of the movement.

Richard Dalby, in his article *B. M. Croker (1848-1920),* states that Croker was one of the most popular and very well documented. Over a 40-year period, she was one of the most famous novelists in the English language world. Praising her novels and her attitude towards the natives, he writes, "Any Englishman in a Croker tale who displayed antipathy or insulting behaviour towards a native Indian was sure to be a villain, and (especially in her ghost stories) met their macabre just deserts." He observes that Croker's "unusual powers of observation, a retentive memory, and a ready vocabulary, formed a valuable equipment for one of her profession." Her novels retained the flavour of old romance, but they were always up to date, never missing the social changes. This is witnessed in her stories as the characters and the

novels keep improving as the world and its social orders move from the late 19th to early 20th century.

Croker also won praise at The Glasgow Herald for her sympathetic attitude towards the Indian social environment. She was skilled in the art of crafting multi-faceted characters with depth and emotional complexity. Her depiction of female characters, in particular, was noted for its nuanced exploration of their inner struggles and societal roles.

A scholar at Karnataka University published a Doctoral thesis Image of India in The Novels of Mrs. B. M. Croker in 2008. This thesis forms an important part and can be considered the initiating point of my work and is extensively read, researched, and referred to for the same. Dr. S. G. Vaidya, author of the aforementioned thesis has documented almost all of Croker's works in his work. He says that "Another important profile of B. M. Croker's feminist stance is her documentation of the attitude of men towards women, as to the latter's liberty and their free movement in society, the criticism of such behaviour often forms an important theme of conversation of male characters. He briefly writes about the miseries faced by British women in colonial India and Britain/Ireland. He has revered Croker's portrayal of women in the following way "Like the floral field, the world of women, created by women novelists, in the garden of Anglo-Indian fiction, draws our unfailing attention, as it offers diverse pictures of feminine nature. Mrs. B.M. Croker, whose contribution to the field is conspicuously magnanimous amounting to forty-six works, has enriched the field in her way. The fictional world created by this distinguished novelist is thickly populated by the heroines rather than the heroes…These heroines, painted carefully, are inducted into such adventurous predicaments that they show various aspects of their moral stance, view of
life and psychodynamics."

OBJECTIVES

In this section, I outline the specific objectives that guide my exploration of B. M. Croker's portrayal of women in the colonial context. These objectives are designed to provide a structured framework for my analysis and offer a deeper understanding of the multi-layered roles, experiences, and challenges of women within her literary works. By addressing these objectives, I aim to shed light on the lesser-explored themes and dimensions of feminism, cross-cultural relationships, and the differences between native and British women in the colonial narrative. This investigation also delves into how women of both races cope with the emotional and social complexities of loss, loneliness, and nostalgia. Finally, I would explore how Croker's storyline and characters evolve from late 19th to early 20th century.

1. **Explore the Role of Women in B. M. Croker's Works: -**
    - Analyse the various roles women play in Croker's narratives, including their societal, familial, and cultural positions; challenges and opportunities for women within the colonial context; examining their agency and limitations.
2. **Shed Light on Croker's Lesser Explored Theme of Feminism: -**
    - Croker's novels showcase feminist themes, challenging societal norms and expectations, particularly within the colonial framework, by presenting female characters with a more nuanced understanding.
3. **Increase the Scope of Research of Colonial Writings Depicting Women in British India: -**
    - Contextualize Croker's representations of women within the broader context of colonial literature during the British Raj.
4. **Study the Portrayals of Love, Marriage, and Cross-Cultural Relationships concerning Women: -**
    - Croker's portrayal of love, marriage, and relationships in colonial settings highlights the impact of gender and cultural differences on women's experiences, challenges, and agency.
5. **Examine the Gap Between Native and British Women: -**
    - Explore Croker's works to understand the socio-cultural, economic, and power dynamics between Indian and British women, highlighting the complexities of colonial hierarchy and the intersectionality of gender and race.

6. **<u>Study How Women of Both Races Coped with Loss, Loneliness, and Nostalgia: -</u>**
    - This study examines the coping strategies of native and British women in colonial contexts, focusing on their resilience, adaptability, and cultural dynamics within Croker's narratives.
7. **<u>Examine the Evolution of Croker's Storylines and Characters from the 19th to the 20th Century: -</u>**
    - The study examines Croker's storytelling techniques and character development over time, considering narrative styles, complexities, and thematic explorations, and how societal changes and historical events influenced her portrayal of women.

These objectives collectively form the foundation of my study and underscore its significance within the broader context of colonial literature and gender studies.

METHODOLOGY

To fully explore the complex representation of women in B. M. Croker's writings, the current study employs a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive methodology. The use of qualitative approach enables a thorough understanding of the many roles and complex positions held by women during colonial times in British India between early nineteenth and late twentieth century. A broad net is cast, drawing from a variety of reference materials, in the quest for a thorough understanding of the subject matter. This includes books, journals, magazines, and theses that have already been published. Each of these resources brought fresh insights and viewpoints to my research. These numerous sources not only enhanced the research process but also offered a solid framework for examining Croker's gender portrayals. Including a variety of texts from multidisciplinary areas and themes became essential due to the dearth of easily accessible secondary sources explicitly related to the research topic. These many sources, which included historical narratives as well as sociological and psychoanalytical research, were crucial in offering a thorough grasp of the sociocultural context of Croker's creative works. Even though they are not directly related to the main topic of this study, these sources have provided insightful information and a more comprehensive framework for interpreting the research findings. In addition, the novels are analysed from the perspective of the social and cultural context of Victorian and Edwardian British India, which facilitates an accurate comprehension of the complex dynamics involved. A greater comprehension of the story's subtleties and complexities—particularly regarding how women are portrayed—was made possible by this contextual reading. This was accomplished by marking several character dialogues and snippets from the novels under study about how women were portrayed in late Victorian and early Edwardian British India. To offer light on the changing gender dynamics within the colonial setting, these novels were further contextualised by comparison with academic publications that especially studied the treatment of women. This multifaceted strategy provided for a more in-depth interpretation of the topic matter in addition to enriching the study.

1. **Types of Data: -**

To carry out the research, data is drawn from two sources of information:

a. **The primary sources of the data: -** Selected eight novels written by Bithia Mary Croker are the primary sources of data.

b. **The secondary sources of data: -** The secondary data sources include author's biographies, review articles of her books, articles of interdisciplinary fields (sociological and psychoanalytical), articles pertaining to depiction of females and their roles and importance in the late 19th and early 20th century colonial India and England.

2. **Method for the Examination of Data: -** The method for examining the data used in this research is called interpretive data analysis. Interpretive research is analysing the data at both descriptive and interpretative depths. It tells an astute story woven in both historical context and theory. This method is used on the basis of the assumption that the stories are partially based on the experiences of the late Victorian-era author.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Studying the portrayal of women in British India through the lens of B. M. Croker is significant for several reasons, as outlined in the provided text. This research carries importance due to the following factors:

1. **Challenging Stereotypical Representations: -** By examining her writings, it becomes possible to challenge and potentially refute the widely held perception of British women as snobbish and dismissive of native women, thus contributing to a more accurate understanding of the complex dynamics of the colonial era.
2. **Unveiling Subtle Feminist Themes: -** This exploration not only highlights the agency and resilience of her female characters but also underscores the evolving role of women in society, thereby contributing to a deeper comprehension of the historical struggles and progress of women's rights.
3. **Promoting Gender Equality Discourse: -** Analysing how Croker's narratives depict the development of strong female characters alongside male counterparts who come to acknowledge the equality of the genders fosters a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics.
4. **Cultural and Historical Insight: -** Studying Croker's works within the cultural and historical context of British India provides valuable insights into the social and cultural milieu of the era.

By undertaking this research, a more comprehensive understanding of the subtle and heterogeneous portrayal of women in the specific historical and cultural context of British India will be gained, which in turn will contribute to a more holistic and accurate representation of the era.

OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH

These achievements will improve our knowledge of the representation of women in B. M. Croker's works and provide us with a more complete view of the wider social dynamics of the colonial period, enhancing our understanding of the roles, experiences and problems faced by women in British India during that time period. The following can be detailed as below: -

1. **Enhanced Understanding of Anglo-Indian women:** A comprehensive understanding of the roles, positions, and degrees of freedom of Anglo-Indian women during the time the novels were written
2. **Exploration of Love, Marriage, and Cross-Cultural Relationships: -** With this study, a clearer understanding of the subtle dynamics and power structures that governed women's relationships in colonial times can be understood.
3. **Insight into Women's Position in Society and Domestic Space: -** This study will give a clearer understanding of the autonomy women had in the context of domestic settings, providing insights into power dynamics, social expectations, as well as restrictions that influenced the lives of women in British India.
4. **Understanding the Portrayal of Native and British Women: -** In order to better understand the nuanced interaction between these two communities of women in colonial India, this analysis will provide information on the complexities of race relations, power differentials, and cultural biases that are characteristic of British India.

These findings will provide valuable insight into the complex interplay between feminism, cultural dynamics, and social expectations when portraying women in literature.

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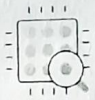
Our testing has found that there is a higher incidence of false positives when the percentage is less than 20. In order to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, the AI indicator will display an asterisk for percentages less than 20 to call attention to the fact that the score is less reliable.



However, the final decision on whether any misconduct has occurred rests with the reviewer/instructor. They should use the percentage as a means to start a formative conversation with their student and/or use it to examine the submitted assignment in greater detail according to their school's policies.

How does Turnitin's indicator address false positives?
Our model only processes qualifying text in the form of long-form writing. Long-form writing means individual sentences contained in paragraphs that make up a longer piece of written work, such as an essay, a dissertation, or an article, etc. Qualifying text that has been determined to be AI-generated will be highlighted blue on the submission text.

Non-qualifying text, such as bullet points, annotated bibliographies, etc., will not be processed and can create disparity between the submission highlights and the percentage shown.

What does 'qualifying text' mean?
Sometimes false positives (incorrectly flagging human-written text as AI-generated), can include lists without a lot of structural variation, text that literally repeats itself, or text that has been paraphrased without developing new ideas. If our indicator shows a higher amount of AI writing in such text, we advise you to take that into consideration when looking at the percentage indicated.

In a longer document with a mix of authentic writing and AI generated text, it can be difficult to exactly determine where the AI writing begins and original writing ends, but our model should give you a reliable guide to start conversations with the submitting student.

Disclaimer
Our AI writing assessment is designed to help educators identify text that might be prepared by a generative AI tool. Our AI writing assessment may not always be accurate (it may misidentify both human and AI-generated text) so it should not be used as the sole basis for adverse actions against a student. It takes further scrutiny and human judgment in conjunction with an organization's application of its specific academic policies to determine whether any academic misconduct has occurred.